

RPG Reload File 014 – 'Final Fantasy'

[November 13, 2014](#) by [Shaun Musgrave](#)



Hello, gentle readers, and welcome back to the **RPG Reload**, the weekly feature where we scour for the severed tails of rodents so that we can wear fancier clothes. Er, metaphorically speaking, of course. Each week, we take a look at an RPG from the App Store's past to see how it holds up today. It's a chance to take a deeper dive or go off on side-quests that might not otherwise fit in our usual reviews. Also, it guarantees that I get to play a good RPG every week and call it work. I try to grab a variety of RPGs covering the many corners of this broad genre, but just to keep things interesting, I throw the choice over to you, the reader, once per month. Simply vote for the game you'd like to see featured by commenting below or popping into the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#) in our forums and you just might see your choice show up next! The final reader's choice Reload for 2014 will be in **RPG Reload 017** at the beginning of December, so get those votes in as soon as you can.

[Last week](#), we kicked off a month I'm loosely referring to as "Origins Month" with a look at *Baldur's Gate: Enhanced Edition* ([\\$9.99](#)), the game that launched Bioware into the upper ranks of the RPG genre almost immediately, a position they maintain to this day. This week, we're swinging things over to the other side of the Pacific Ocean to take a look at a game that had an equal effect for its developer. *Final Fantasy* is arguably the most well-known RPG brand in the world, and although many would say that its best days are behind it, it still remains a powerful force in the market and one of the last bastions of the big-budget console JRPG genre. Looking at more recent installments like *Final Fantasy 13*, *Final Fantasy Type-0*, and *Final Fantasy 14*:

A Realm Reborn, it's hard to believe how much things have changed since the first *Final Fantasy* ([\\$7.99](#)) shuffled in, hat in hand, but looking back on the game, it's also interesting to see how some things haven't changed much at all.



Though the series has by now been without him for almost as long as it was with him, the story of *Final Fantasy* starts with a man by the name of Hironobu Sakaguchi. An electrical engineering drop-out, Sakaguchi joined Square in 1983 as a part-time employee, along with his friend Hiromichi Tanaka, who shared his passion for the ground-breaking American computer game, *Wizardry*. At that time, Square was a tiny division of a company that made power lines, and they mostly made games for Japanese computers like the NEC PC-8801. Sakaguchi's first work was on the game *The Death Trap*, an interactive fiction title about a special agent involved in the Cold War. Its sequel was a particular success for Square, and in 1986, they soon spun off into their own independent company, at which time Sakaguchi became a full-time employee. He worked on several games, most of which were middling performers to say the least, but he always yearned to make an RPG like his beloved *Wizardry*. Before *Dragon Quest* hit, Square believed

such a game wouldn't sell very well, so he wasn't allowed to make his dream project. After the smash success of that title, he finally got the go-ahead to make his RPG.

The game was to be called *Fighting Fantasy*, and regular readers of this feature know that title wasn't going to be long for the world due to, you know, someone already using it. Needing a name change, Sakaguchi went with *Final Fantasy* because, according to him, if the game did not sell well, he would give up game development and go back to university. He was joined by fellow designers Koichi Ishii, who would go on to create and oversee the *Mana* series, and Akitoshi Kawazu, who would eventually create the *SaGa* and *Crystal Chronicles* games. While Sakaguchi was a *Wizardry* fan, Kawazu was quite fond of *Dungeons & Dragons*, and brought many elements from that game into *Final Fantasy*'s battle system, including things like elemental weaknesses for the first time in a Japanese RPG. Ishii contributed the idea of the crystals, and he also referred Sakaguchi to artist Yoshitaka Amano, who would create the visual identity of the series for years to come. The music was composed by Square veteran Nobuo Uematsu, and programming chores were handled by Nasir Gebelli, who was also quickly becoming a Square regular.



Final Fantasy was released for the Famicom in Japan on December 17th, 1987, and almost every employee of the company at the time helped see it through. Square bet hard on the game at Sakaguchi's insistence, and luckily for them, him, and all of us RPG fans, the bet paid off handsomely, selling out every copy Square initially ordered and then some. It also enjoyed a fair bit of success in upon its July 1990 release in North America, mostly thanks to Nintendo's savvy marketing efforts through their *Nintendo Power* magazine. The game has been ported to countless other systems, including MSX2, WonderSwan Color, PlayStation, Game Boy Advance, PSP, and of course, iOS and Android. The game has changed considerably from its original form, both in presentation and in mechanics, with most modern versions being based on the rules from the Game Boy Advance *Dawn Of Souls* remake. The iOS version was released on February 12th, 2010, making it approximately a billion years old in iOS years. Boy, does it feel it, too. But we'll talk about that later on.

This game was not the first RPG I played by any stretch, but I think it was one of the first Japanese RPGs I obsessed over. Granted, I had played *Dragon Quest* ([\\$2.99](#)), like any kid with a *Nintendo Power* subscription, but as I had

my roots in computer RPGs, I found the game to be a bit on the simple side. *Final Fantasy*, on the other hand, was love at first sight. I first saw it in *Nintendo Power* issue 12, which had *Super C* on the cover. It was a big six-page spread, with a handful of screenshots and illustrations and individual paragraphs talking about things like airships, sleeping elf princes, and the dreaded Marsh Cave. Bring plenty of Heal Potions to the Marsh Cave, the magazine said, and 11 year-old Shaun made a note of it. The screens showed a party of characters whose jobs you could choose, which reminded me of my beloved *Ultima* games, and subsequent issues revealed that there was even a second tier of jobs to be unlocked by brave heroes. This was thrilling stuff! Unfortunately, my next opportunity to get a game would be at Christmas, an agonizingly long way away from early summer when you're that age. I continued to follow the coverage of the game, making notes of all of the tips, imagining in my mind what party I would choose and the awesome adventures I would have. Nintendo sent out a strategy guide that had maps, equipment and spell lists, and even a monster compendium, all of which I devoured voraciously. Is it Christmas yet?



Well, Christmas finally came, and I tore into that game. My first party would

be, of course, the *Nintendo Power*-approved party of Fighter/Black Belt/White Mage/Black Mage, who I named Shin, Kick, Rade, and Cass. The latter two still show up today in RPGs where I can name my characters, though Shin and Kick went to the glue factory long ago. Together, we knocked Garland down, crossed the newly-built bridge to one of the best RPG tunes ever composed, took down some rowdy pirates, got a ship, and traveled to ocean to visit the Elf Kingdom. There, the prince slept, and the only chance to wake him up was with some herbs from the witch, Matoya. She wouldn't give us the herbs until we got her Crystal Eye back, and the king who held *that* wouldn't help us until we recovered his stolen crown from the Marsh Cave. What a tangled knot! Wait, did he say... the Marsh Cave? This was it! Just as I was advised, I hunkered down outside the Elf Kingdom and beat ogres until I had enough money for 99 Heal Potions. You mustn't enter the Marsh Cave until you have 99 Heal Potions, you see. It's simply not done.

After a whole lot of scraping and grinding, I set out for the Marsh Cave, traveling the fairly lengthy distance through forests filled with poisonous monsters. Upon reaching the cave, this horrible scar in the earth, I set up camp to make sure everyone was healed up and my mages had their spells restocked. You had to be careful about this, because *Final Fantasy* originally followed *Dungeons & Dragons* rules for spells, allow you a certain number of castings per level. Using another spell from the same level as healing magic meant having one less healing spell to use, for example. After resting up, I timidly set foot into that Marsh Cave. I slowly made my way through, collecting treasures and battling poisonous monsters and undead horrors, before finally reaching the room that held the crown. I knew the crown was guarded by Wizards, a tough enemy, and I knew any number could spawn, depending on my luck. I took a deep breath, stepped forward, and was mercilessly slaughtered by four Wizards. Of all the luck! The Marsh Cave had claimed another victim that day.



A day or two later, I came back to the Marsh Cave, a bit stronger and with the powerful LIT2 spell in hand. This time I lucked out and only two Wizards came out to play, a relatively easy battle. After clearing them out and taking the crown, I saved at the Inn in the Elf Town, and brought the king his crown. He turned out to be a dark elf, of course. I died soon after. This happened a lot in *Final Fantasy*, but it was never as scary or intimidating as the Marsh Cave, that dreaded Marsh Cave. Eventually, I was able to finish the game, after which I immediately started again with a new party. This time, I made my job selections by rolling six-sided dice, a tradition I've continued to this day. Sometimes, it results in a pretty easy time, while other combinations make for a real challenge run. It's always a little bit different, and I can always learn something new. It's one of the things I love most about *Final Fantasy*. For the record, for this playthrough, I rolled Fighter/Red Mage/White Mage/Black Mage, also known as the easiest of easy modes. The only way that party gets better is by dropping that hipster Red Mage for a butt-kicking Black Belt, or as he's known today, Monk.

Final Fantasy cribs mercilessly from other sources. *Wizardry*, *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Nausicaa*, *Dragon Quest*, and others were homaged, referenced,

and sometimes outright ripped off. One of the first graphical changes in the series of ports and reissues was to replace the Beholder at the, ahem, *request* of *D&D* owners TSR. That said, it's an incredible pastiche. You can customize your party, travel around a vast world using a variety of means including an airship, battle huge elemental monsters in their home turf, and class change into cool-looking advanced jobs including ninjas. You'll meet mermaids, dwarves, robots, and even a golem who likes to eat gems. I think he's the cousin of the Rock Biter from *The Neverending Story*, actually. You'll battle in ancient tombs and the remnants of an advanced civilization who forget to turn off all of the terrifying nuclear mechas on their way out. Though the story was pretty thin, as was usual at the time, it was still quite impressive relative to its peers, and its ending even kicked off a series tradition of incomprehensible time compression schemes. *Dragon Quest* seemed positively pedestrian in comparison to *Final Fantasy*'s wild and unpredictable nature. Interestingly, both series have held like that to date. *Dragon Quest* is almost impossibly down to earth relative to its stature, while *Final Fantasy* is never afraid to go absolutely space-bananas at any moment.



I love this game a lot, and I can't say I'll ever truly get tired of it. Played it

already? Play it again! Roll the dice this time, if you dare. It's an easy recommendation, even in modern days, because of its careful balance of scope and good pacing, and its variety of viable party builds and strategies. The only question is as to which version you should play, and that's a trickier thing to answer. You see, something sad happened to *Final Fantasy* from the Game Boy Advance release onward. Square made it easy. Really easy. It's nearly impossible to lose, and the main quest lacks any meaningful challenge whatsoever. You can more or less walk through right to the end within a few hours if you have a mind to. Even the dreaded Marsh Cave is nothing more than grade-school spelunking now. It's still fun, in a way, to take this little tour, and it's certainly a nice option for people who don't have the time to deal with the original game's stiff opposition. Certain party builds will run into challenges in the game's new optional content, but watering down the main game definitely takes away a lot of its character. The simple act of changing the magic system from level-based charges to more typical MP even takes away from the original's unique flavor of strategy.

As the iOS version is essentially the PSP version, which was based on the Game Boy Advance version, those criticism apply equally here. Unfortunately, that's just the first of the caveats that apply to this version of the game. It's a very old app, and apart from adding languages and performing a couple of critical fixes, it's basically untouched from its early 2010 debut. That means the game lacks support for all of the following: larger screens like the iPhone 5/6, native iPad resolutions, MFi controllers, retina displays, iCloud, and even multi-tasking. Switch out of the app and come back, and you'll find yourself back at the title screen. Now, the game is pretty good about quick-saving, so you only need to resume your game in most cases to get back to where you were, but it's still old-fashioned in all the wrong ways. On top of that, it has audio problems with iOS 8, and although there's an easy fix, it's still something you have to fix on your own. Sure, *Final Fantasy* still runs, and that's more than I can say for the rest of Square Enix's lineup at the moment, but of all their games, this one is probably in the highest need for a serious update. The upcoming 3DS

version seems based on the PSP/iOS version and adds new features, so there's obviously someone still capable of manipulating the code this version is built on. Come on, Square Enix, the game that built your company surely deserves a little tender loving care, doesn't it?



This isn't the version of the game I'd recommend the most by any means, but it's still quite playable as long as you can put up with a lack of modern iOS conveniences. Of the post-GBA ports, this is the best one at the moment, but if you have the means, I'd give a much stronger recommendation to the PS1 *Origins* version of *Final Fantasy*, available on PSN and playable on PS3, PSP, and Vita. It lets you choose whether or not you want some of the options aimed at turfing the difficulty, and I find it strikes a nice balance between old and new. I do enjoy some of the new content in this version, with the cameo bosses being a particular joy. Those *Final Fantasy 3* ([\\$14.99](#)) bosses look great in high-resolution 2D, don't they? Also, for all my griping about the general ease of the main quest, the optional Labyrinth of Time and its boss Chronodia, added from the PSP version onward, provide a solid challenge to even veteran players. It's worth at least one trip, even for those who prefer the harder, harsher original.

That's my take on *Final Fantasy*, but it's just what I think. I want to know what you think about the game, whether in its original form or any of its remakes. I got a bit personal in this article, so feel free to do the same! Please leave your comments below or in the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#) in the forums, and don't forget to vote for the next reader's choice feature. You can also vote on Twitter by tweeting to @RPGReload. As for me, I'll be back next week with another old favorite that's near and dear to many of our hearts. Good luck finding your rat's tails, everyone, and as always, thanks for reading!

Next Week's Reload Hint: *From 'Z' to 'A', it's a great action RPG!*